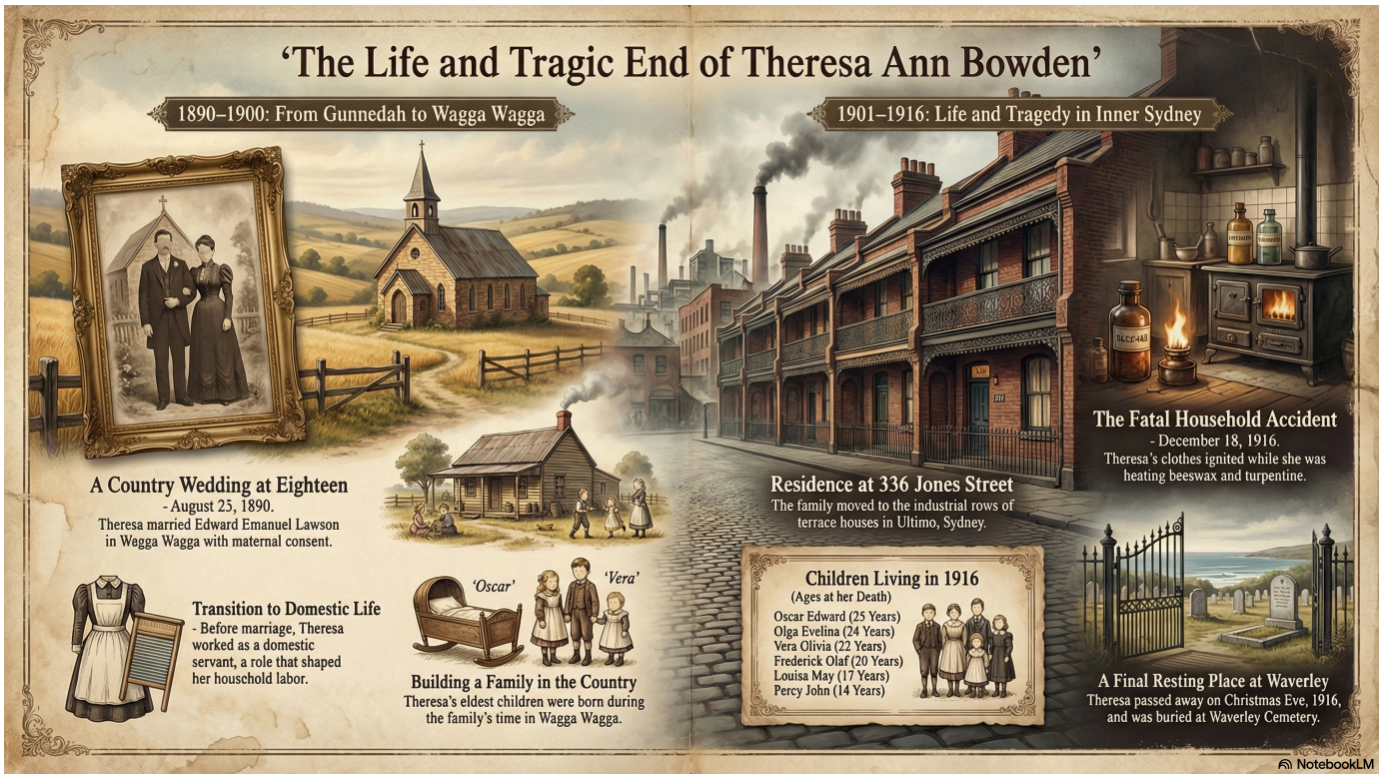
Turpentine and Tears: The Lethal Secret in an Edwardian Kitchen

CH Carmel H
18 January 2026

Theresa Ann BOWDEN (1873-1916) BOWDEN



Terrace houses, Jones Street
Pyrmont, 1919

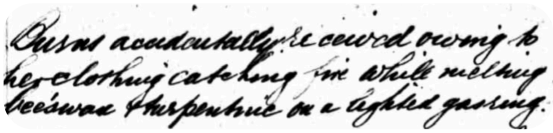
Life in the terraces

In our modern age of sterile safety, we find plenty of colourful plastic bottles of cleaning supplies lining our supermarket shelves. We spray, we wipe, and we move on. But for women in the early 20th century, maintaining a pristine home could be a volatile business. Before the advent of ready-made detergents, the kitchen was the workspace where housewives brewed their own caustic mixtures. For Theresa Ann Bowden, a woman who had navigated a life of hard work from an early marriage in Wagga Wagga to the bustling wharves

of Sydney, the cloying scent of a household chore would become a prelude to a Christmas Eve tragedy.

A Lethal Recipe for Floor Polish

Gemini AI generated picture Feb 2026


Burns accidentally received owing to her clothing catching fire while melting beeswax & turpentine on a lighted gas ring.

The scene was the cramped kitchen of a terrace house at 336 Jones Street, Ultimo. The date recorded in official accounts is November 18, 1916. The cause was a domestic hazard of the era: "linoleum cream." Theresa was melting beeswax and turpentine over a flickering gas ring. It was a volatile, highly flammable cocktail. When the mixture boiled over and ignited, Theresa, perhaps fearing for the safety of her home, attempted to carry the mixture of liquid fire outside.

Her clothes caught instantly. In a desperate, blur of heat and smoke, she screamed for help. A boarder and wharf labourer named Bernard Eliassen rushed to beat out the flames with his coat. In a final, agonizing display of presence of mind, Theresa staggered into the yard and stood under a tap, dousing herself in water. Despite these efforts, the shock was too great. She passed away at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital on December 24, 1916, turning what should have been a season of family joy into one of profound mourning.

This snippet of text from a coroner's report reads:
"Burns accidentally received owing to her clothing catching fire while melting beeswax & turpentine on a lighted gas ring."

The Coroner's Verdict

> ULTIMO WOMAN'S DEATH. BURNT WHILE HEATING BEESWAX.

> While Theresa Ann Lawson, 45, was heating some beeswax over a gas ring in her kitchen at 336 Jones-street, Ultimo, on [November 18], her clothes caught fire. She screamed for help and Bernard Eliassen, a wharf laborer, who boarded at the place, ran into the kitchen and beat out the flames with his coat. Mrs. Lawson was taken to the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Camperdown, and died on December 24. At an inquiry held at the City Coroner's Court, evidence was given by Dr. R. B. Minnett that when he admitted Lawson into the hospital she was in a state of collapse due to shocks and burning, which, in his opinion, caused death. The Coroner returned a verdict of death from the effect of burns accidentally received.

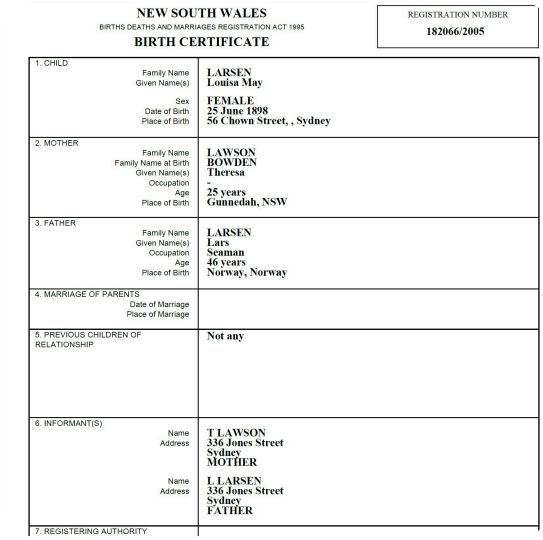
A Family in the Time of War

Theresa's domestic tragedy was compounded by the global shadow of the Great War. Two of her sons were away, serving in the Australian Imperial Force. Frederick Olaf Lawson had enlisted in 1915 and was wounded in action while serving with the 4th Battalion; he would eventually return to Australia in 1919 aboard the *H.T. City of Poona*.[2]

But it was the fate of her son Oscar "Ossie" Lawson that truly illustrated the family's heavy toll. Having survived the terrors of the front, Ossie returned only to be consumed by tuberculosis. He spent his final days at the Wentworth soldiers' hospital, originally known as "Boddington," a private hospital for tubercular complaints in the mountain air of Springwood in the Blue Mountains. He died in January 1918, aged approximately 26, just thirteen months after his mother. The irony was bitter: a mother lost to the hazards of the home, and a son lost to a slow death after surviving the most violent conflict in human history.

> At Wentworth soldiers' hospital there passed away a young consumptive soldier, Mr. Ossie Lawson, aged 26, the brother of Misses Olga, Vera, Louie, Percy, and Fred (on active service). Boddington, which was Dr. MacIntyre Sinclair's private hospital

> for sufferers from tubercular complaints, is now used only for returned soldiers.



NEW SOUTH WALES
BIRTHS DEATHS AND MARRIAGES REGISTRATION ACT 1995
BIRTH CERTIFICATE

REGISTRATION NUMBER
182066/2005

1. CHILD Family Name Given Name(s) Sex Date of Birth Place of Birth	 LARSEN Louisa May FEMALE 25 June 1898 56 Chown Street, , Sydney
2. MOTHER Family Name Family Name at Birth Given Name(s) Occupation Age Place of Birth	 LAWSON BOWDEN Theresa - 25 years Gunnedah, NSW
3. FATHER Family Name Given Name(s) Occupation Age Place of Birth	 LARSEN Lars Seaman 46 years Norway, Norway
4. MARRIAGE OF PARENTS Date of Marriage Place of Marriage	
5. PREVIOUS CHILDREN OF RELATIONSHIP	Not any
6. INFORMANT(S) Name Address Name Address	 T LAWSON 336 Jones Street Sydney MOTHER L LARSEN 336 Jones Street Sydney FATHER
7. REGISTERING AUTHORITY	

Birth certificate of Louisa 1898

Navigating the Lawson-Larsen Divide

The Bowden-Lawson family records offer a fascinating, if confusing, glimpse into the fluid identities of Sydney's working-class and immigrant communities. Theresa Bowden had married Edward Emanuel Lawson in Wagga Wagga in 1890, but within seven years she was in Sydney with four small children. No death record has been located for Edward Lawson but her daughters listed him as deceased on their marriage records. Theresa's life in Sydney was anchored by Lars Larsen, a Norwegian seaman.

This transition created a genealogical puzzle. When her daughter Louisa May was born in 1898, the parents were listed as Lars Larsen and Theresa Lawson. Yet, on Louisa's 1919 marriage record, a "ghost" appears: her mother is listed as "Teresa Ann Doble." Given that Theresa's parents were Samuel Bowden and Catherine Lamb, the name "Doble" remains an unexplained mystery, perhaps in her grief Louisa was unaware of her mother's maiden name, or it had been a brief, unrecorded alias in a life lived on the move. Family legacies are rarely linear; they are often as messy as the wharves, docks and yards where the men of the family earned their keep.

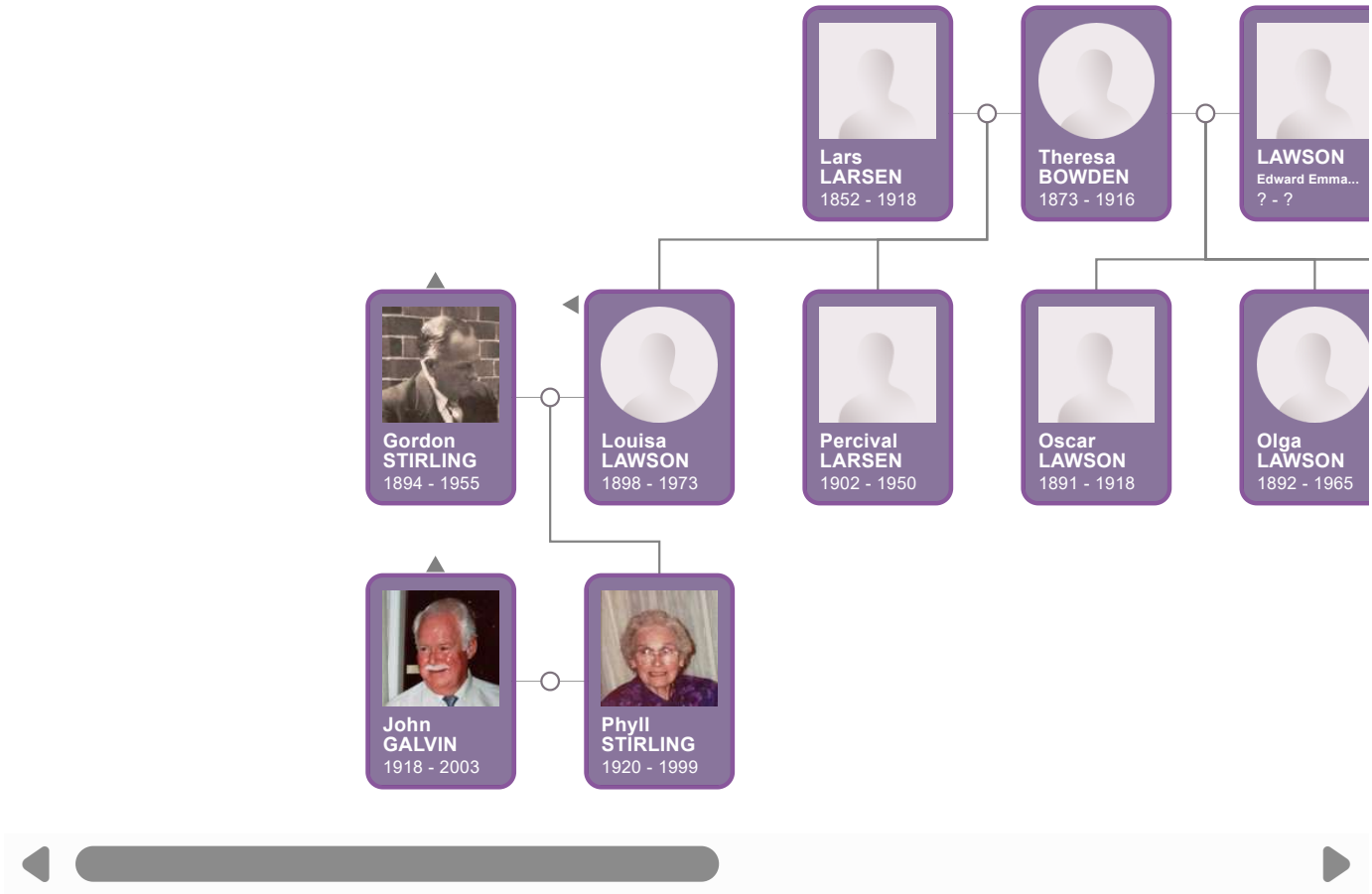
The Immigrant Anchor

If Theresa was the heart of the home, Lars Larsen was its "immigrant anchor." A Norwegian seaman who spent over 30 years in the New South Wales, Lars transitioned from the heavy labour of the wharves to the life of an "invalid pensioner," battling chronic bronchitis and cardiac failure for fifteen years.

Lars who was twenty years older than her, survived Theresa by less than two years, dying in October 1918. The strength of this blended family is evident in his final records. It was not a blood relative who acted as the informant for his death certificate, but his stepdaughter, Olga Lawson. The funeral notices in the newspaper of the day listed him as Lars Lawson, their “late beloved father” indicating he had played the primary role of father in their lives.

A life lost to a tragic accident

The story of Theresa Ann Bowden is a testament to the fragile nature of domestic life in the early 20th century. Her death was not the result of a grand historical movement, but of a single, volatile moment in an Ultimo kitchen, a recipe for floor polish that went horribly wrong.



LAWSON.—The Relatives and Friends of Mrs. THERESA ANN LAWSON are invited to attend her Funeral: to leave 336 Jones-street, Ultimo, THIS DAY, at 2 p.m., for Church of England Cemetery, Waverley.
WOOD, COFFILL, and COMPANY, LTD.

LAWSON.—The Friends of OSCAR, OLGA, FRED, LOUIE, and PERCY are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of their dearly beloved MOTHER, to leave her late residence at 2 p.m. THIS DAY, for Church of England Cemetery, Waverley.

LAWSON.—The Friends of Mr. and Mrs. J. WESTCOTT are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of their dearly beloved MOTHER, to leave her late residence, 336 Jones-street, Ultimo, at 2 p.m. THIS DAY, for Waverley.

LAWSON.—The Friends of Mrs. AYRES and Mrs. W. PIKE are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of Mrs. TERESA ANN LAWSON, to leave her late residence, 336 Jones-street, Ultimo, THIS DAY, at 2 p.m., for Waverley Cemetery.

1916 'Family Notices', The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), 26 December, p. 3. , http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15691086

DEATH FROM BURNS.

The death of Theresa Ann Lawson (45) at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital on December 24, from the effects of burns received at 336 Jones Street, Ultimo, on November 18, was the subject of an inquiry at the Coroner's Court yesterday. Alice Malone, who lived next door to the deceased, said she saw her melting beeswax and turpentine over a gas-ring. Shortly afterwards witness heard screams, and found deceased lying on the floor with her clothes on fire and screaming. A finding of accidental death was recorded.

1917 'DEATH FROM BURNS.', Goulburn Evening Penny Post (NSW : 1881 - 1940), 4 January, p. 3. (EVENING), http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article98878678

LAWSON.—The Friends of the late LARS. LAWSON (late of Surry Hills) are kindly invited to attend his Funeral; to leave Charles Kinsela's Private Mortuary, 143 Oxford-street, city, THIS (Friday) MORNING, at 9.30, for Waverley Cemetery.
CHARLES KINSELA,
Funeral Director,
'Phone, 694 P'ton. 143 Oxford-street, city.

LAWSON.—The Friends of Mr. and Mrs. JAMES WESTCOTT, of 423 Crown-street, Surry Hills, are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of their late beloved FATHER, Lars. Lawson; to leave Charles Kinsela's Private Mortuary, 143 Oxford-street, city, THIS MORNING, at 9.30, for Waverley Cemetery.
CHARLES KINSELA,
Funeral Director.

LAWSON.—The Friends of Misses OLGA and LOUISE LAWSON, also Messrs. PERCY and FRED. LAWSON (on active service) are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of their late beloved FATHER, Lars. Lawson; to leave Charles Kinsela's Private Mortuary, 143 Oxford-street, city, THIS FRIDAY, at 9.30 a.m., for Waverley Cemetery.
CHARLES KINSELA.

LAWSON.—The Friends of Mr. and Mrs. ROBERT AYRES are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of their late beloved BROTHER-IN-LAW, Lars. Lawson; to leave Charles Kinsela's Private Mortuary, 143 Oxford-street, city, THIS FRIDAY, at 9.30 a.m., for Waverley Cemetery.
CHARLES KINSELA,
City and Suburbs.

1918 'Family Notices', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW : 1842 - 1954), 11 October, p. 5. , http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15806080

1918 'Family Notices', The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW : 1842 - 1954), 11 October, p. 5. http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article15806080

SOURCES (3):

[1] 1917 'ULTIMO WOMAN'S DEATH.', Evening News (Sydney, NSW : 1869 - 1931), 4 January, p. 1. http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article114373528

[2] National Archives of Australia LAWSON Frederick Olof : Service Number - 3148 : Place of Birth - Wagga Wagga NSW : Place of Enlistment - Holdsworthy NSW : Next of Kin - (Mother) LAWSON Theresa Ann

[3] 1918 'SOCIAL CHAT OF THE DAY', The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People (Sydney, NSW : 1900 - 1919), 12 January, p. 8. https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/106028840

TAGS

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